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ABSTRACT

Fantasy theme analysis (as propounded by Ernest Bormann) has tremendous potential as a tool for investigation of popular music as a rhetorical transaction--specifically, popular music as mimetic discourse. The early tradition of the rhetoric of music focuses on music as a persuasive medium, deriving rhetorical value from the way discourse affects audiences. However, an equally compelling case can be made for music as mimetic discourse, deriving rhetorical value from the way music reflects audiences, and examining the relationship between substance and audience. Fantasy theme analysis presents a description of rhetorical transaction which offers insight into the relationships between the content of public expression and the visions people share. Popular songs express personal fantasies which have gone public. Audiences who accept popular songs find in them psychodynamic common ground which bonds participants into a rhetorical community. Song texts provide an excellent means for the investigation of the psychological processes of the people who share a culture. (Thirty-seven notes are included.) (SR)

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Musical Visions:
Fantasy Theme Analysis and the Study of Popular Music

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Ernest Bormann's notion that the content of public communication is replete with messages which help participants make sense out of a confusing here-and-now (fantasy), and which by so doing nurture symbolic convergence and create symbolic common ground for those who share the fantasies (rhetorical vision), has served as a starting point for critics interested in investigating a wide range of rhetorical experiences. While a seemingly constant feature of fantasy theme analysis has been its focus on persuasive discourse, the construct has tremendous potential for assisting critics interested in the mimetic dimension of rhetorical transaction. The purpose of this paper is to discuss one such circumstance, namely the rhetorical analysis of popular music.

Popular Music as Mimetic Discourse

The idea that music is a potentially powerful mode of human expression is not particularly novel. After all, in the Republic Plato has Socrates warn Adiemantus "never are the ways of music moved without the greatest political laws being moved. . . ."[1] However, only in recent years have rhetorical critics evidenced much of an interest in the rhetorical potential of music.[2] For the most part, critiques which fall under the rubric of a rhetoric of music have looked at music as a genre of persuasive discourse. In retrospect, this is understandable. Embedded in

our classical tradition is Aristotle's directive that "Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion," and his admonition, "This is not a function of any other art."[3] It was just such an equating of persuasion and rhetoric which led Stephen Kosokoff to assert in 1966 that "[One] is hard-pressed to argue against the study of one previously ignored rhetorical medium. That medium is the song. . . ."[4] Kosokoff has not been alone in this regard. Most of what can be regarded as the early tradition of the rhetoric of music is grounded in the belief that the rhetorical potential of music lies in its persuasive character.

Equally responsible for the tendency to focus on music as a persuasive medium is what may be the single most important monograph addressing the rhetoric of music. James Irvine and Walter Kirkpatrick laid the foundation for assessing the rhetorical potential of music in their discussion of music as communicative interaction.[5] Initially, they indicate, musical symbols are manipulated in the mind of an artist, making music a communicative <u>act</u>. Manipulation may also occur in the minds of an audience, making music a communicative <u>event</u> in which artistic act invites audience response. In the latter context, artist and audience interact in a relationship Irvine and Kirkpatrick refer to as <u>rhetorical</u>. They write, "If the artist is functioning within the rhetorical category of intent, the formulation of variables is carried on with one of two possible goals: to reinforce an existing attitude of [sic] value, or to alter existing attitudes or values in a persuasive manner. Within the

rhetorical category of intent, the artist is directly and deeply concerned with the possibility of his personal musical art [sic] becoming a communicative event inviting a specific response from other persons."[6] An alternative relationship between artist and audience is referred to as expressive. In this context, creative expression is pursued for artistic self-fulfillment, with only tangential concern for whether the musical act becomes an event inviting response. Such interaction, they opine, is decidedly "non-rhetorical." They do, however, argue that expressive songs are potentially rhetorical in that they may unintentionally reinforce or persuade. Songs which are intentionally expressive undergo metamorphosis in the minds of the audience and become existentially persuasive. As John David Bloodworth notes, "when a song is sung publicly or is recorded it becomes potentially goal- or effect-oriented as it gains an audience. The song never loses its expressive purpose, but it may gain an instrumental function as soon as it is heard by an audience."[7] Thus, music which is intended as an expressive act may unintentionally function as a persuasive event.

While the rhetoric of music has been well served by the notion that music is potentially persuasive, an equally compelling case can be made that the rhetorical potential of music is likewise embedded in its character as mimetic discourse. Mimetic discourse may be distinguished from its persuasive counterpart in that while the latter derives rhetorical value from the way discourse affects audiences, the former derives

rhetorical value from the way discourse reflects audiences. Ernest Wrage explained mimetic discourse as it relates to traditional public address. "Because speeches are instruments of utility designed in the main for the popular mind, conversely and in significant ways, they bear the impress of the popular mind. It is because they are pitched to levels of information, to take account of prevalent beliefs, and to mirror tone and temper of audiences that they serve as useful indices to the popular mind."[8] Wrage's populist view of rhetoric holds that the substance of messages directed to popular audiences necessarily reflects prevailing values and attitudes. Thus, messages which are formulated as instrumental acts may also vicariously function as a medium of audience expression. From this perspective, mimetic criticism differs significantly from persuasive criticism. Rather than looking at discourse as a persuasive event and focusing on how speakers intend to affect audiences, mimetic criticism looks at discourse as a consubstantial event and examines the relationship between substance and audience. Rhetorical potential is not defined so much by what messages say about speakers or situations as it is by what messages say about audiences.

The argument that mimetic criticism may be extended to include musical discourse is grounded in the musicological theories of Alan Lomax and Alan Merriam. For a number of years, Lomax has argued that songs reflect a society's way of life in that they function for social as well as personal expression. "Music is a magical summing-up of the patterns of family, of

love, of conflict, and of work which give a community its special feel and shape the personalities of its members. Folk song calls the native back to his roots and prepares him emotionally to dance, worship, work, fight, or make love in ways normal to his place."[9] The chief function of song, he writes, "is to express the shared feelings and mold the joint activities of some human community. . . ."[10] The music favored by this community "reflects and reinforces the kind of behavior essential to its main subsistence efforts and to its central and controlling social institutions."[11]

Merriam expresses a similar belief that music mirrors society. Like Lomax, Merriam argues that music involves collective emotion and functions for its expression. Social songs are "the result of some human behavioral processes that are shaped by the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the people who comprise a particular culture."[12] Accordingly, music serves as a repository of the concerns of the society in which it is found, both communicating and reflecting normative values. Song texts, Merriam indicates, reveal much about a society. "In discussing song texts, we have had occasion to point out that one of their outstanding features is the fact that they provide a vehicle for the expression of ideas and emotions not revealed in ordinary discourse."[13] The language of song is often more permissive than other forms of discourse. Music thus functions as a safety valve for expressing deep-seated values and aspirations which would otherwise be stated only with the greatest reluctance. Merriam

concludes, "In music, as in the other arts, basic attitudes, sanctions, and values are often stripped to their essentials. . . . In this sense, music is a means of understanding peoples and behavior and as such is a valuable tool in the analysis of culture and society."[14]

Fantasy Theme Analysis and Mimetic Discourse

Bormann believes that people cope with their here-and-now condition by constructing subjective interpretations which account "plausibly for the evidence of the senses."[15] He explains, "Events are often complicated and chaotic. People dislike a senseless world, so they try to find an explanatory pattern within the chaos."[16] Bormann refers to such pattern as fantasy, or the "creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need."[17] According to Bormann, rhetorical transaction publicly proclaims fantasies.

Although generally interpreted as a way of explaining persuasive discourse, the construct presents a description of rhetorical transaction which offers insight into the relationships between the content of public expression and the visions people share. Admittedly, Bormann's primary focus has been on the way fantasy functions in instrumental contexts. "Much of what has commonly been thought of as persuasion," he writes, "can be accounted for on the basis of group and mass fantasies."[18] He professes particular interest in the way individual fantasies chain out as more and more people

participate in fantasy expression and come to recognize a common ground of values and attitudes. He explains, "A member dramatizes a theme that catches the group and causes it to chain out because it hits a common psychodynamic chord or a hidden agenda item or their common difficulties vis-a-vis the natural environment, the socio-political systems, or the economic structures. The group grows excited, involved, [and] more dramas chain out to create a common symbolic reality. . . ."[19] Those who share the fantasy may, in turn, take the fantasies to other groups and the dramas might continue to chain out and be taken up by larger publics. In going public, the fantasies catch up large groups in a rhetorical vision of reality. As the vision emerges, those who share the fantasies in appropriate ways bond together through common symbolism to form a rhetorical community.[20] Bormann notes, "When we share a fantasy, we make sense out of what prior to that time may have been a confusing state of affairs and we do so in common with others who share the fantasy with us. Thus, we come to symbolic convergence on the matter and envision that part of our world in similar ways."[21]

This view of rhetorical transaction coincides with our understanding of mimetic discourse. As Bormann indicates, his view of fantasy expression is grounded in symbolic convergence theory -- or the notion that audiences converge as they jointly identify with the fantasies which make up a rhetorical vision. An individual buys into a vision because he sees in its dramatizing messages vestiges of his personal subjective reality. A vision chains out when and because groups of people <u>share</u> the

fantasies expressed in the messages. The common fantasizing which leads to convergence is documented in the dramas embedded in the content of the messages which make up a rhetorical vision. Embedded dramas are important either in the frequency with which they appear in the messages or in the qualitative significance of the messages in which they do appear. According to Bormann, rhetorical critics can thus "describe the social reality contained in the shared consciousness as represented in the rhetorical vision constructed from a study of the fantasy themes and types, the analogies and [the] figurative language in a body of discourse."[22] He concludes that through fantasy theme analysis scholars may attempt to "explain the way members of a rhetorical community, who share the same consciousness and rhetorical vision, discuss their problems, concerns, delights, hopes, fears, and dreams as they go about their daily business, their worship, and their social affairs."[23]

In an instrumental context, critics focus on fantasy themes as they chain out. A vision is reconstructed in hopes of uncovering how it sustains a group, arouses its members emotionally, and drives them to action. Conversely, in a mimetic context critics focus on fantasy themes chained out. The themes are viewed as components of a rhetorical vision which expresses a subjective reality shared by the group. Mimetic criticism is less concerned with how symbolic common ground was used to impel a group to action than it is with identifying common ground and understanding the subjective social reality it represents.

Bormann suggested something akin to a mimetic view of fantasy when he discussed the rhetorical vision of the Puritans. "If we examine the internal fantasy of the community as revealed in the sermons of their ministers, we discover the characters of the drama, their emotional values, their actions, and their relationship to an over-reaching supernatural power. We come to a new understanding of the grubbing in the wilderness and we have an opportunity to be in possession of much more of the Puritan experience."[24]

To suggest that the late Gerald Mohrmann was unimpressed by fantasy theme analysis as a critical tool would be an exercise in understatement. "Fantasy theme method," he wrote, "is not a logically consistent extension of the theoretical bases from which writers contend it derives, and . . . [their] critiques tend toward circularity in applying the dramatism that is the hallmark of the approach."[25] At the risk of oversimplifying Mohrmann's laborious critique of fantasy theme analysis, his difficulties with the method can be reduced to three basic objections: the method presumes a relationship between fantasy and instrumental effect which is inconsistent with its theoretical heritage, it presumes a relationship between small group and cultural fantasizing which is contrary to common experience, and it contributes to shallow and mechanical criticism. While Mohrmann's difficulties with the method were substantial, they seem to be far more damning when applied to persuasive discourse than when applied to mimetic discourse.

Bormann has been quite clear in attributing his notion of

fantasy to the work of Robert Bales.[26] According to Mohrmann, however, Bales would be unlikely to concur with the claim that fantasy theme analysis enables scholars to "account for the development, evolution, and decay of dramas that catch up groups of people and change their behavior (emphasis added)."[27] Mohrmann selected as Bales retort the admonition, "It is often thought that fantasy precedes overt behavior and forecasts it, so that knowing the content of an individual's fantasy, one can predict how he is likely to behave. . . . Surely this conception is too simple. . . . Knowing only fantasy we cannot predict behavior. Knowing only behavior we cannot predict fantasy."[28] While the apparent inconsistency seems to strike at the very heart of fantasy theme analysis when applied to persuasive discourse, it is of far less concern when the method is applied to mimetic discourse. While mimetic criticism certainly does not reject the assumed interconnections between fantasy and overt behavior, it does not depend upon them. Mimetic criticism assumes only that when audiences let public messages speak (sing) for them, the content may be understood as vicarious expression. Mohrmann seemed to have little difficulty with the basic notion of fantasy, and at one point his rendering of Bales sounds suspiciously mimetic as he likens group fantasizing to catharsis. The point is, since mimetic criticism is not concerned with whether discourse invites instrumental response, the question of overt behavior becomes a matter of interest rather than one of necessity.

Mohrmann's second difficulty with fantasy theme analysis was more to the point. "There is," he wrote, "no basis for suggesting a dramatistic linking between chains in small groups and in any corresponding phenomenon appearing in society at large."[29] Mohrmann's point was that accepting chaining within small groups does not entail accepting that chaining proceeds beyond the group. "Except for subconscious elements, there is no necessary connection between or among fantasies and no reason to expect that the dramatistic content of one will share features with another."[30] Mimetic critiques are much less concerned with concatenated fantasies than are critiques of persuasive discourse. After all, it is really a question of the size of the group within which fantasizing takes place.[31] It is the coincidence of fantasy which interests mimetic critics, and it is in such coincidence that mimetic discourse finds its rhetorical potential. The fact of shared fantasy is fundamental to mimetic criticism. Whether those fantasies chain from or to groups is incidental.

Mohrmann's final difficulty with fantasy theme analysis was that it "lives in a circular argument and in a taxonomy so confining that it is almost kind to say that it 'sometimes has yielded criticism that seems formulary and predictable.'"[32] The charge that the hierarchy of fantasy themes, types and visions is "flaccidly developed" is well taken. Bormann constructed a fantasy theme vocabulary by mating the languages of rhetoric and group fantasy, and calling upon dramatism as a reluctant midwife. The result is sometimes confusing. Whether ambiguity necessarily

leads to circular criticism is another matter. "The appropriate terminology," Mohrmann wrote, "is intoned monotonously, as if incantation would substitute for close analysis and considered judgment, as if the critics intuitively were aware that . . . they must persuade by repetition."[33] The charge was that fantasy theme critics are guided by taxonomy rather than intuition and their critiques characterized by description rather than discovery. As Mohrmann put it, "Fantasy theme critics seem to believe that dramatic action and interaction are apprehended immediately upon the listing of setting, plot, and a few stock characters."[34] Fantasy theme analysis <u>is</u> prone to mechanistic application, as is criticism cloaked in the language of pentads or rhetorical situations or, for that matter, the language of Aristotle. If there is a circle, it is of Mohrmann's making. He rejected the intuition of fantasy theme critics because he did not share their assumptions about group fantasizing. Having rejected their intuition, Mohrmann was not likely to find the critics intuitive. There are problems with the taxonomy, but the list does not include being inadequate to express intuition. The difficulty Mohrmann had with the assumptions, and thus the intuition, of fantasy theme criticism was grounded in his belief that fantasy is not necessarily persuasive. Had he examined the method applied to mimetic discourse, Mohrmann should have found the assumptions more pleasing and the possibility of mechanistic criticism less likely.

Fantasy Theme Analysis and Popular Music

Bormann argues that through fantasy theme analysis critics may "explain the way members of a rhetorical community, who share the same consciousness and rhetorical vision, discuss their problems, concerns, delights, hopes, fears, and dreams as they go about their daily business, their worship, and their social affairs."[35] Wrage made much the same point in more conventional terms. "The study of ideas provides an index to the history of man's values and goals, his hopes and fears, his aspirations and negations, to what he considers expedient or inapplicable. . . . Ideas attain history in process, which includes transmission. The reach of an idea, its viability within a setting of time and place, and its modifications are expressed . . . in a mosaic of documents, in constitutions and laws, literature and song, scientific treatises and folklore, in lectures, sermons and speeches."[36] This paper has focused on a particular piece of the mosaic -- popular music. It has proceeded from the assumption that song texts reveal as much about a public as do lectures and sermons and speeches. Popular songs express personal fantasies which have gone public. Audiences which accept popular songs find in them psychodynamic common ground which bonds participants into a rhetorical community. Merriam explains that "because of the freedom of expression allowed in song, texts seem clearly to provide an excellent means for the investigation of the psychological processes of the people who share a culture."[37]

Notes

[1] Plato Republic, 424c, trans. Allan Bloom, The Republic of Plato (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 102.

[2] The first speech communication dissertation to address the rhetoric of music was completed in 1966, and the first such monograph to be printed in a journal published by the Speech Communication Association or one of its regional affiliates appeared in 1970. See Stephen (Kaye) Kosokoff, "The Rhetoric of Song: Singing Persuasion in Social Action Movements" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1966), 2; also Stephen Kosokoff and Carl W. Carmichael, "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech and Attitude Change," Southern Speech Journal 35 (Summer 1970), 295-302.

[3] Aristotle Rhetoric, 1355b 25-30, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle, ed. Friedrich Solmsen (New York: Modern Library, 1954), 24.

[4] Kosokoff, "The Rhetoric of Song," 2.

[5] James R. Irvine and Walter Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations," Quarterly Journal of Speech 58 (October 1972), 272-284.

[6] Irvine and Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form," 277.

[7] John David Bloodworth, "Communication in the Youth Counter Culture: Music as Expression," Central States Speech Journal 26 (Winter 1975), 306.

[8] Ernest J. Wrage, "Public Address: A Study in Social and Intellectual History," Quarterly Journal of Speech 33 (1947), in Robert L. Scott and Bernard Brock, Methods of Rhetorical Criticism: A Twentieth Century Perspective (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 106.

[9] Alan Lomax, The Folk Songs of North America (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1950), xv.

[10] Alan Lomax et al., Folk Song Style and Culture (Washington, D.C.: American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1968), 3.

[11] Lomax et al., Folk Song Style and Culture, 133.

[12] Alan P. Merriam, The Anthropology of Music (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 6.

[13] Merriam, The Anthropology of Music, 219.

[14] Merriam, The Anthropology of Music, 13.

[15] Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," Quarterly Journal of Speech 58 (December 1972), 400.

[16] Ernest G. Bormann and Nancy C. Bormann, Speech Communication: A Basic Approach, 3rd edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 179.

[17] Ernest G. Bormann, The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 5.

[18] Bormann, The Force of Fantasy, 9.

[19] Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision," 399.

[20] Bormann and Bormann, Speech Communication, 85.

[21] Bormann, The Force of Fantasy, 9.

[22] Bormann, The Force of Fantasy, 24.

[23] Bormann, The Force of Fantasy, 3.

[24] Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision," 405.

[25] G. P. Mohrmann, "An Essay on Fantasy Theme Criticism," Quarterly Journal of Speech 68 (1982), 110.

[26] Bormann allows that "Bales provided the key part to the puzzle when he discovered the dynamic process of group fantasizing." Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision," 396. The reference is to Robert Freed Bales, Personality and Interpersonal Behavior (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

[27] Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision," 399.

[28] Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism," 113. The quotation was drawn from Bales, Personality and Interpersonal Behavior, 137.

[29] Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism," 115.

[30] Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism," 115.

[31] Although Mohrmann was disinclined to address this issue, he did refer to a letter in which Bales wrote, "A fantasy, whether formed by an individual, or in a process of interaction in a small group, or by a process of more attenuated communication through larger population groups, may 'fit' a widespread

motivational need for an appropriate image so well, that it is widely adopted forthwith (emphasis added)." Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism," 115.

[32] Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism," 121. The quoted passage is from Edwin Black, "A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism," Western Journal of Speech Communication 44 (1980), 335.

[33] Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism," 124.

[34] Mohrmann, "Fantasy Theme Criticism," 124.

[35] Bormann, The Force of Fantasy, 3.

[36] Wrage, "Social and Intellectual History," 103-104.

[37] Merriam, The Anthropology of Music, 201.